coming. "Speaker?"

The Ixmahx lifted his head warily and was just going to speak when the comm unit came to life with Uhura's voice.

"Captain, there has been an antimatter explosion on the planet, and a Romulan vessel is approaching."

"Shields up and stall them! No, belay that. No contact. If they try to contact us, fire on them."

"Without warning, sir?"

"That's what I said, Lieutenant."

"Aye aye, sir."

The Ixmahx gathered himself together with visible effort, but there was the ring of authority in his voice when he spoke.

"No, Captain. There is no longer the necessity. The Wielda no longer calls me."

"Are you all right, sir? Would you like my medical officer to look you over?" As he made the offer, Kirk realized there had been no sounds of the activity there should have been if they were taking Spock to sickbay. He looked around.

T'serek's only reaction to Kirk's struggle with Nadia had been to gather Spock's still form closer. The boy's expressionless, his gray eyes wide but unseeing. He's in shock, thought Kirk to himself, but McCoy was also too still and there was a spreading chill in the room as the other's took in Spock's stillness, T'serek's grieving silence. He felt the blood drain out of his face. Why wasn't Bones doing something....

McCoy felt that unasked question all around him, but he had no attention to spare. His eyes were fixed on the display of his tricorder, and he was cursing it silently--come on, damn you--as the display flickered and faded, then flickered again. Was it his imagination? No. Heartbeat, respiration imperceptible to the naked eye. His own heart began to beat again.

"It's all right, Jim. It's the healing trance. He's alive."

T'serek's distant gaze had slowly focused on McCoy. Unsure, afraid to hope, he looked for another face in the confusion, found it, white as his own, read the confirmation there and bent his head suddenly to hide his face against Spock's hair.

Eyes stinging, Kirk knelt beside them, started to touch the boy, drew back his hand and placed it instead on Spock's shoulder. "Dray--"

"Captain to the bridge. Captain Kirk, to the bridge please," came Uhura's voice again, more insistant this time. They had lifted Sunderson and Nadia, were helping the Speaker down off the platform.

"He's in shock, Jim," came McCoy's careful voice. "He probably doesn't know what he's doing. He won't be able to understand you."

"I believe I can assist you with the Romulan problem, Captain," the Speaker said.

Kirk ignored them all. "It's the Captain, Dray. Spock is all right. He'll get better in sickbay." T'serek's shoulders, spattered with the blood of three races, were trembling, but he didn't respond. "I'm going to take him to sickbay now," Kirk's voice was gentle. "I'll take good care of him. You have to let him go, now."

Only Kirk was close enough to hear the indrawn breath with which T'serek steeled himself before he let his grip relax, but he knew it for what it was--a soul in agony. He stood back and let McCoy's medics lift Spock to the gurney, help T'serek stand up. Nothing he could do. Tardily he remembered Uhura's call, and the Speaker, standing now at the console. Think about it later, he told himself. As they left the room, he looked back at the shambles they had made of it. Where T'serek and Spock had lain there were smears of rust red and kelp green on the floor.

"Get something and clean that up," he told Brown as they left.

There was no real contest with the Romulan. They didn't try to contact either the Enterprise or the planet, although they went down for a look at the crater left by the antimatter explosion. It seemed to cool their interest, and they headed out toward deep space again. Goren's account of events on the planet in a report to the Admiralty effectively lifted the planetary quarantine. The duty day was over, and the Enterprise heading out into the interstellar gulf under new orders before Kirk made it back to sickbay.

He knew McCoy would have called him if any of the returned crew were awake, but sickbay drew him anyway. How many vigils had he spent there in the dim light of the readouts, listening to the muted sounds of the ship underway? How many mistakes had he expiated in the sweat and pain of injuries? That was the easy way. This time others had paid. Three dead. Two injured. Two in shock. His fault because he'd sent the wrong team for it. Goren's observations had not been couched in terms of criticism--after all, they had saved his world--but enough had come through to show Kirk that he had saddled Spock with the wrong personnel. It was a miracle the Vulcan had been able to bring it off, and Kirk cringed away from the thought of his burned hands.

McCoy was still hovering, and he looked out of his brightly lit office into the dimness.

"Is that you, Jim?"

Kirk accepted the implied invitation reluctantly. McCoy had warned him about sending Spock and Dray together, and while he didn't mind kicking himself, he wasn't in the mood for outside recriminations just yet. But McCoy didn't begin to rate him; if anything, he seemed uneasy at Kirk's presence stirring the clutter on his desk, adjusting the light lower. Sudden apprehension sharpened Kirk's voice.

"What's the matter? You said they'd be all right?"

McCoy reflected that he had not said that. He hadn't said anything. That was what the Captain wanted to hear. "It's not that, Jim. Everything's under control. Sit down, why don't you. I can't talk with you looming over me."

Kirk settled uneasily into a chair. What now?

"I wanted to talk to you about Spock." But instead of going on, McCoy stuck there, fiddling with